

Caprice

Bob Wands

The first time he died once, in an airplane accident, sixty-seven seconds of spinning and screaming then nothing. The next time he died twice, first in a plane again, but slowly, a crash on take off, trapped between crushed seats, jet fuel dripping from the floor, mixing with blood on his hands before igniting to a hot white darkness. Then, after a moment's rest, a farm machine fed his body into a large steel screw while he watched, screaming.

Soon he was up to three deaths a day, then four, and five. He rode a motorcycle struck by an exploding truck tire, lost a race around a closed crossing gate, slipped on a bar of soap in the bathtub, succumbed to the slow metastasis of testicular cancer, mouthed off to a robber at a liquor store. Half his day was spent with input, and half in the chair, wired to the computer, receiving the signals that took him through each of his final seconds again and again.

There was the lightning strike on the golf course, a phone pole struck avoiding a squirrel, the wasting aids death, the truck bomb, airplane bomb, subway bomb, a subtle design flaw that crushed a hundred people in formal wear under tons of concrete and steel.

On the final day, he loaded ten deaths, with no rest between. The first three were quick, electric deaths; an ungrounded power tool on wet grass, a blow dryer in the bathtub, an aluminum ladder on a power line. The next four were slower, hypothermia in a car stranded midwinter on a closed road in Nevada, a broken leg and dehydration in a mountain meadow, suffocation in a collapsed ditch, drowning in the vortex at the base of a dam. The final three were at the hands of men, Drano force down the throat by a video store robber, a knife in the stomach in an argument over a parking space, a bullet in the head from a sniper in the mall.

He woke to the hum of cooling fans, and chattering hard drives, muscles tingling from the adrenal surge. He ran his hands over his chest, felt it expand, warm, whole, and screamed till his jaw hurt. But the deaths had returned to their home in the patterns of magnetized metal oxide, and he was hungry.

He closed the door and stood unsteadily on the sidewalk, listened to street sounds, stretched his arms backward, looked up to watch the clouds above the buildings. It was good to be alive. He stepped into the street.

His body came to rest near the wheels of a parked car seventy-five feet away. He watched his blood slide across the tiny sharp-edged rocks embedded in the asphalt, down the road's crown toward the storm drain. Someone leaned over, asking him to say something. Words bubbled up his throat, sprayed a red mist with each aspiration of his convulsive laugh:

“God, this is the best one yet.”